

## Engaging Saudi EFL Students in Online Peer Review in a Saudi University Context

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### **Abstract:**

This study focuses on a Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) context. It employs Google Docs as an educational tool to engage Saudi EFL students in online peer review to address some challenges faced instructors when they implement peer review in class. The main goals of the study are examining what kinds of corrective feedback that Saudi EFL students provide when they edit their peers' texts in Google Docs, how they can improve their texts based on the collaborative online peer review, and what their attitudes are toward using Google Docs as an online peer review tool. The study utilizes Google Docs, an online questionnaire, and an interview as research tools; after thematic analysis, the results show that Saudi EFL students focus on local and global writing issues and provide different types of corrective feedback that aid them to improve their writing. They have positive attitudes toward using Google Docs in peer review. This tool allows them to engage in an online social environment outside the classroom, feel as critical editors, adjust their writing, and avoid embarrassment. The results also suggest that hierarchical power in the classroom and students' prior beliefs and experiences can impact their responses to the given feedback from teachers and peers. This study recommends instructors to integrate online peer review as a genre and move beyond low-stakes genre in EFL writing courses at the university level.

**Key Words:** corrective feedback, EFL writing, Google Docs, online peer review, Saudi EFL students

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## Introduction

Peer review has received attention from writing researchers and instructors recently (Chang, 2015; Yu, 2016; Hu, 2005). In the EFL Arab contexts, several studies have revealed some challenges faced by instructors when integrating peer review in the classroom. Ezza (2010) states the teacher's central role as the main source of corrective feedback on students' writing influences the effectiveness of classroom peer review on writing. Likewise, Al-Hazmi and Schofield (2007) highlight another challenge to the effectiveness that is learners' focuses on surface-level errors in their feedback. Time restrictions in writing courses also influence peer review in the EFL writing classroom (Razak & Saeed, 2014). Additionally, the author's teaching experiences at the Saudi university context suggest that Saudi EFL students' belief and other cultural norms impact the practice of peer review in writing classes.

Establishing a social environment by using technological applications, such as Google Docs and Facebook, might overcome some of the limitations and challenges in face-to-face peer review. These applications enable EFL instructors to create an interactive online learning environment in which students can promote their critical thinking while they provide comments on their peers' texts either inside or outside the classroom. In EFL contexts, particularly in the Saudi context, there have been a few face-to-face peer review studies (for example, Alnasser & Alyousef, 2015; Al-Hazmi & Scholfield, 2007). These studies use peer review in EFL writing classes and focus on Saudi's attitudes toward peer review in the classroom and which kinds of error corrections the students provide to their peers. However, none of the above-mentioned studies have implemented Google Docs as an online peer review tool and targeted Saudi EFL students who study at a Saudi university. In this context, the author's teaching experiences suggest that some EFL students are reluctant to provide corrective feedback on their peers' texts when they interact orally in class. Rollinson (2005) describes the reason behind this reluctance and articulates that some EFL student writers "from certain cultures may feel uncomfortable with . . . the social interaction demanded by peer review" (p. 26). For example, in certain cultures, second language (L2) students may feel intimidated by participating in class peer review, concerned that they might threaten their peers' faces or their comments might bother their peers (Ferris, 2003). Hence, the emergence of technology can alleviate the above-mentioned issues by using online peer review, especially in the Saudi EFL contexts where the majority of students are not accustomed to using technology in a writing course. Therefore, this study focuses on the Saudi EFL context and employs Google Docs as an educational tool to engage Saudi EFL students in online peer review. It aims to answer two questions. First, what kinds of corrective feedback do Saudi EFL students provide when they edit their peers' texts in Google Docs? And, how do they develop their texts based on the collaborative peer review? Second, what are Saudi EFL students' attitudes toward using Google Docs as an online peer review tool?

## Literature review

### Corrective feedback and its types

Corrective feedback in writing usually refers to local issues, such as errors on form, or/and global issues related to content, such as rhetorical aspects of writing. Van Beuningen (2010) mentions that corrective feedback fosters language learning and develops accuracy because it offers opportunities for English students to identify their own writing issues related to linguistic and interlanguage. Nevertheless, another study raises concerns about the use of corrective feedback and suggests this kind of feedback may not be helpful for students' writing development (Truscott & Hsu, 2008). Ferris (2004, 2010) indicates that the usefulness of written corrective feedback is a topic of considerable debate. As a result, there has been considerable controversy among researchers about the usefulness of corrective feedback in learning and teaching the language (Guénette, 2007). To clarify, the debate is between researchers who argue that students should receive corrective feedback to improve their accuracy in writing and others who do not believe in the effectiveness of corrective feedback.

Regarding the effects of corrective feedback on students' writing, Lyster and Ranta (1997) identify different types of corrective feedback that would improve students' writing. Some of these types are clarification requests, repetitions, recasts, explicit error correction, and metalinguistic feedback. Ellis (2004) and DeKeyser (1998) refer to different kinds of corrective feedback: explicit and implicit. Van Beuningen (2010) illustrates another classification of corrective feedback which is direct or indirect feedback. Direct corrective feedback clarifies the written error and its correction, whereas indirect corrective feedback signifies just an error written in text. However, the corrective feedback types used in this study are those identified by Lyster and Ranta (1997).

### Peer Review

Peer review, whether face-to-face or online, is known by distinctive terms; these include “peer feedback,” “peer response/revision”, or “peer editing” (Liu & Hansen, 2002). These terms are used interchangeably to refer to peer review in this study. Nelson (1997) describes that the term peer review “refers to students’ reading and responding to each other’s written work to provide their peers with comments on how they can improve the draft versions of their papers” (p. 77). This reflects how the teacher’s comments are no longer considered as the primary source of written corrective feedback on student writing. In fact, it is a learner-centered approach where learners can interact with each other to negotiate their writing errors, enhance a sense of audience, and clarify the purpose of their writing (Liu & Sadler, 2003). This work of peer review is considered as collaborative and cooperative (Oskoz & Elola, 2011). It is also supported by the notion of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development which assumes that learners can perform at a higher level when they receive support from others (Ortega, 2009). Similarly, in peer review activities, learners move from correcting their written content individually to collaboratively working with each other to share opinions and suggestions that improve their written texts. Thus, each learner can receive support from his peer. This collaborative peer review is different from feedback provided by a teacher because it aids students to be more critical readers and revisers of their own and peer’s writing (Rollinson, 2005).

In the contexts of EFL, classroom peer review has received attention from English researchers and instructors in recent years. Grami (2010) states, “If students are properly trained to use peer feedback, the benefits could be very significant, and therefore it recommends that education policy-makers and ESL writing teachers in Saudi Arabia should do more effort to introduce peer session to all ESL writing classes” (p.1). So, the lack of training is an issue that EFL students encounter when they provide feedback on their peers’ text. Moreover, other researchers have investigated various issues of face-to-face peer review, including more focus on addressing local issues, such as grammar and vocabulary, and less attention to global issues in writing, such as content and organization (Al-Hazmi & Scholfield, 2007). Nevertheless, Alnasser and Alyousef (2015) find that EFL students have a preference for giving and receiving peer feedback on both levels local and global on their writing. Likewise, other studies have shown that EFL students can provide useful peer feedback that addresses global dimensions of writing, such as content, organization, and rhetoric (Min, 2005; Ruegg, 2015; Hu, 2005; Xu & Liu, 2010).

There are other positive effects of peer review. Students can have active roles in their writing, improve their critical skills needed to analyze and revise peers’ writing, receive feedback from multiple sources, and build confidence when they provide and receive written peer feedback (Ferris, 2003). Lastly, peer feedback internalizes a sense of audience in EFL student writers’ minds because it provides them with a realistic and tangible audience than writing only for their teacher (Lundstorm & Baker, 2009).

Based on the above-mentioned studies, there are researchers who agree that several issues constrain the effectiveness of face-to-face peer review while others believe that peer review represents an interactive environment which allows EFL students to respond to macro or/and micro writing issues immediately or

spontaneously (Chang, 2012; Liang, 2010). On the other hand, other researchers argue that online tools are superior to face-to-face peer review because they enable EFL students to comment on their peers' texts and facilitate their interaction as well as feedback exchanges (Liu & Sadler, 2003).

The results of previous studies (for example, Bradley, 2014; Chang, 2012) support the role of online peer review as it boosts EFL students' engagement in writing revision outside the classroom. As new technology emerges in education, there are several studies which have employed technological tools, such as Wiki and Facebook, to engage students in electronic feedback. Tuzi (2004) moves from face-to-face peer review to electronic responses. This researcher finds that although L2 student writers prefer oral feedback, the electronic feedback has a greater impact on revision than oral feedback and it helps L2 writers focus on larger writing blocks. Similarly, Ghazali, Sahuri, and Abdulrab (2018) find that EFL students perceive the Facebook group as an interactive learning environment which facilitates their peer feedback on writing beyond the university context.

There are other EFL studies that have emphasized the values of online peer review. Min (2008) finds that online peer feedback can result in better writing because it promotes revision. Figl, Bauer, and Mangler (2006) also suggest the digital peer review can help teams to enrich their discussions. In terms of promoting critical thinking skill, Guiller, Durnell, and Ross (2008) compare the transcripts of online and face-to-face discussion and indicate that the online mode facilitates the development of critical thinking. Likewise, Crank's (2002) study of asynchronous peer response and face-to-face peer response in a college classroom reveals that the use of e-mail improves the quality of peer review, helps students to express their thoughts, and allows them time to think about their reactions.

### **Google Docs for peer review**

Many writing instructors request L2 writers to share their writing in Google Docs with peers for providing feedback. This digital tool can support both synchronous and asynchronous editing and comment by multiple users on different computers. The main author can permit collaborators to view, edit, and comment on any document at any time. Snyder, a presenter in TESOL International Association 2018, suggests that Google Docs facilitates high-quality peer review because it gives more time to students to read their peers' papers than what it is available in class. Multiple peer reviewers can edit the written texts in Google Docs, making it a desirable online application for a collaborative learning. In terms of checking peer comments, teachers can reply to peer review comments if students are giving misleading feedback. This application makes auto-save every second so that students cannot lose their papers and creates a history of revision of any document that allows teachers and students to track the progress made in a particular essay.

## **Methodology**

### **Context and participants**

The author is an English lecturer at a Saudi university where he taught Saudi male EFL students several writing courses in two semesters, Fall 2016 and Spring 2017. At that time, students did not practice peer review in any writing classes. So, he trained them in two class periods about 90 minutes for each to practice peer review in class and show them how they could read their peers' texts and provide different kinds of corrective feedback that focus on form and content. This training was helpful and enhanced the students' knowledge about peer review. However, several factors constrained students from giving effective feedback to their peers, such as students' cultural norms and time constraint. For example, they were worried about the loss of face and embracement when engaging in classroom peer review. After a year, the author piloted online peer review as a tool to address some of the cultural concerns. Similarly, Yu and Hu (2017) reveal, "Five major factors emerging from the multiple sources appeared to have played an important role in influencing the students' peer feedback practices. They are: (a) student beliefs and values..." (p.30).

Thus, using online peer review may be an effective tool that is effective beyond the classroom context.

The author requested permission from the Department of Languages and Translation, where he taught, to recruit Saudi EFL students who were interested in online peer review through Google Docs outside the classroom context. Only five Saudi male EFL students (Ahamed, Ibrahim, Mahmoud, Rayan, and Sami) confirmed via e-mail that they were willing to participate in this study. These five names are pseudonyms. All five students are seniors and their major is English. Arabic is their first language. They have studied English since grade 6 and their English proficiency level is intermediate. The author taught them writing courses about a year ago. In this study, all five participants engaged in an online peer review via Google Docs outside the writing courses to examine what kinds of corrective feedback they give to their peers, how the provided feedback in Google Doc can develop their writing, and what their attitudes are toward using this digital peer review.

### **Instruments and procedures**

This study employs three main instruments: Google Docs, online questionnaire administrated via Qualtrics, and oral interview via phone. The author created a Google Docs document and shared it with the participants when the study took place. This document encompasses instructions written in English and Arabic that the participants read and applied outside the classroom. The first instruction was that watch a short video on YouTube that explains how to use Google Docs. Secondly, respond to a writing prompt “write a short essay to your friend who is unfamiliar with Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar when Muslims fast during the day, and provide him with basic information about this month and possible religious and cultural activities that you practice” This topic is relevant to the participants’ religion and Saudi culture. A reason for selecting an essay genre is that the participants are more familiar with the five-paragraph genre and they are not taught to write in different advanced genres, such as reports, formal letters or memos. They responded to the prompt under their assigned names in a shared Google Docs that allows asynchronous editing and commenting by multiple users on different computers simultaneously. Therefore, after each participant finished responding to the prompt, the author divided them into pairs so that each one could make the necessary corrections and changes in his peer’s text.

The third instruction was an access to a link that enabled the participants to fill out an online questionnaire via Qualtrics. It contains five questions written in English that elicit information about which writing errors, global or local, and which corrective feedback types that the participants focused on when they provided comments on their peers’ writing in Google Docs. They had been given the right to choose either Arabic or English when they responded to the questionnaire.

The last instruction was an oral interview. The author contacted the participants via phone and asked them eight questions without recording based on their request. They preferred to make the interview in English. The interview took from six to eight minutes outside the classroom setting. Each participant responded to eight questions in English that reflect his prior experience and attitude toward online peer review. During the interview, the author wrote down the participants’ responses to the questions.

### **Data analysis**

This study employs thematic analysis that is a common form of analysis in qualitative research that focuses on identifying and analyzing themes within the collected data. This approach also concentrates on people’s experiences and their feeling and attitudes toward doing an activity. To demonstrate, the author looked closely at the participants’ provided feedback in Google Docs and their answers to the questionnaire and interview questions. In order words, he read and re-read the participants’ collected data from the three instruments in order to figure out what the data involved and to pay attention to the frequent themes that occurred. Then, he documented their occurrences where they occurred and turned them into labels in order

to create categories for analysis. The last process was analyzing the data by describing the frequent themes and making references to them.

## Findings and discussion

### Google Docs

In a Google Docs document, all participants wrote an introduction, two body paragraphs, and a conclusion then they edited their peers' writing. The two figures below show different kinds of corrective feedback and writing errors that each participant focused on while editing his peer's text.

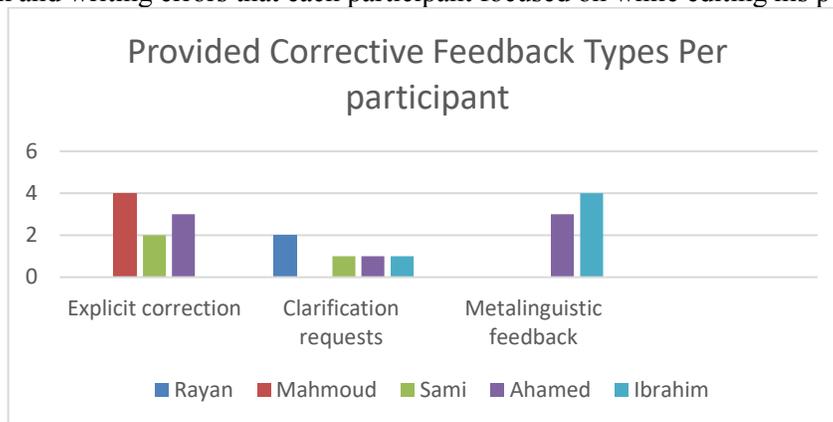


Figure 1: Corrective Feedback Types practiced in Google Docs

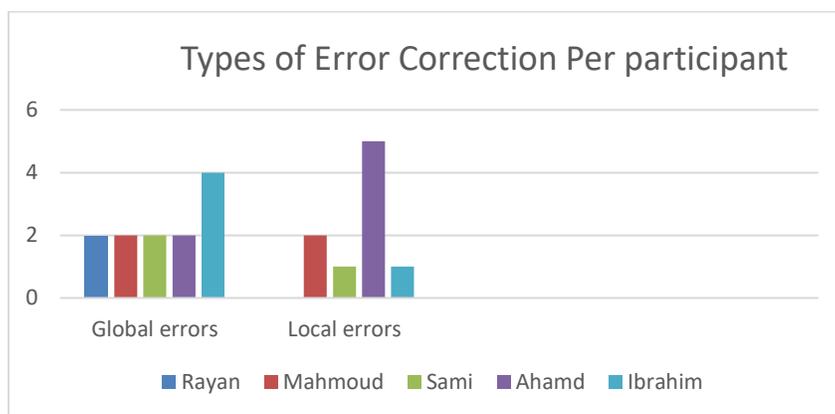


Figure 2: Types of Error Correction practiced in Google Docs

Regarding the provided corrective feedback in Google Docs, all participants practiced three types of corrective feedback: clarification request, explicit correction, and metalinguistic feedback. Among these kinds, clarification request was the most preferred feedback among four participants (see *Figure 1*).

First of all, Ramadan is a special month for Muslim to fast for Allah ,and they do many acts of worships. The Muslims do many prayers to refrain from sins. For example, Tarawih prayer. In addition, in Ramadan, all Muslims read the Quran and they are careful to sealing the Quran. Ramadan is one of the best months for Muslims.

Secondly, in Ramadan has a lot of sports and social activities practiced during the month of Ramadan: Volleyball, Football and FIFA games. And, of the social activities during the month of Ramadan: All members of the family meet and eat Efftar when the fast is over. Also, we exchange conversations with each other. To Sum up, worships and various activities of the most important things in Ramadan. But, I hope you understood what wrote in this essay and got your admiration



Figure 3: Examples of clarification request

In Figure 3, Rayan made two clarification requests when he reviewed his peer's text. For example, he raised two questions: "What do you mean by Quran?" and "What do you mean by Fifa?" Rayan aimed these questions could help his peer Sami to consider his audience who might not familiar with the two terms "Quran" and "Fifa". The biggest concern for Rayan when he edited his peer's text was the comprehensibility of the content for readers who might not know what is Quran, the Holy book, and Fifa that stands for The Fédération Internationale de Football Association. In order words, Rayan's provided feedback did not value local writing issues. This theme, focus on audience, is also relevant to the findings of other studies, such as (Lundstorm and Baker, 2009; Min, 2005).

Writer: Ibrahim  
Peer reviewer: Ahamed

#### Muslims activities in Ramadan

Islam is the religion of more than a billion faithful over the world. It has been spreading since it started in Mecca in 600s. Every faithful has to believe in Allah, his messenger Mohammad (peace be upon him), prays five prayers everyday, give the charity-which is taken from worthy to provide to the poor, fasts Ramadan month, pilgrimages to Mecca as much as possible,so I will provide you with some information about Ramadan and the activities that muslim tend to do.

The fourth pillars of the Islam or fasting of Ramadan take place at Ramadan which also, called the blessing month. It starts after the end of the eighth month. All the Muslims over the world wait for appearance of new moon which announced the



Figure 4: Clarification request and metalinguistic feedback examples.

In Figure 4, the data shows that the peer reviewer, Ahamed, provided his peer with an explicit correction that is "The first letter should be capital" in "activities" written in the title. This corrective feedback indicates that the writer should have edited his grammatical mistake based on the given explicit comment. In this feedback, Ahamed identified a local error. Moreover, metalinguistic feedback was the second given corrective feedback that contains a question raised by Ahamed "Can you tell where is the mistake?" So, he did not make an explicit correction; in fact, his comment required this peer to consider the cues included in the question. Thus, Ahamed's peer needed to figure out the error and its correction based on his grammatical competence. This kind of feedback is to "encourage the learners to function at his or her potential level of ability" (Ortega, 2009, p. 226). In order words, metalinguistic feedback begins with implicit prompt, such as Ahamed's question "Can you tell where is the mistake?" to encourage the writer's self-regulation instead of increasing reliance on explicit corrections. This is known as the Zone of Proximal Development tuned assistance where the corrective feedback is graduated, implicit prompts, contingent, and relying on the self (Ortega, 2009).

Overall, in Google Docs, the participants' comments included three corrective feedback types, clarification request, explicit correction, and metalinguistic feedback, and they commented on global and local errors. Nevertheless, the participants focused more on form when providing comments on the texts of their peers. Unsurprisingly, this focus reflects how some EFL instructors emphasize form over content on students' writing in the Saudi context. It appears that participants mirror their writing instructors in how they provide corrective feedback; they utilized this feedback on their peers' texts in Google Docs.

### Questionnaire

All participants answered five questions via accessing a shared link in Qualtrics. After analyzing the participants' answers to the first question, they followed a common approach when they corrected their peers' texts. The approach was close reading then providing corrective feedback that would improve their peer's texts. In addition, their answers to the other three questions show that they preferred to provide as well as receive comments on local and global issues and give three different kinds of corrective feedback as shown in *Figures 1 and 2*. In short, their answers in the questionnaire align with the findings of the feedback analysis of Google Docs.

The last question in the questionnaire reveals that the participants preferred receiving comments from peers via Google Docs. Mahmoud's response to the last question was "Your best friend's comments because he is closer to you than the teacher." Receiving comments on writing from peers was preferable by three participants who could negotiate their writing errors due to a friendship that is not affected by hierarchical power in the classroom. Nonetheless, other participants chose to obtain writing comments from both teacher and peer. For instance, Ahamed stated, "I prefer feedback from both but from teacher more because he helps me to improve my writing more than my peer review". So, Ahamed's prior experiences with peer review might not be positive as he received comments from his peer that were less constructive compared to the feedback he obtained from his teacher. Trust is another factor that makes Ahamed prioritized his teacher corrective feedback over his peers. Believing teacher is the only qualified and authoritative source to comment on students' writing plays a vital role in how students view their peers' provided feedback. Therefore, students' prior beliefs and experiences of teachers and peers' feedback can influence their writing development when responding to the feedback.

To summarize this section, all five participants implemented a common approach when they commented on their peers' texts. They focused on local and global issues and provided different types of corrective feedback. Similarly, these results are consistent with Alnasser and Alyousefs (2015) in that participants concentrated on both error kinds. The classroom hierarchical structure and students' prior beliefs and experiences can impact their responses to the received feedback from teachers and peers. Similarly, this factor of students' beliefs is also found in the study of Yu and Hu (2017). Thus, writing instructors should not be the only source of feedback on students' writing; in fact, they need to integrate peer review into course design and use it consistently so that students can value their peers' comments (Hedgecock & Ferris, 2013).

### Interview

The five participants chose to speak English when the author interviewed them orally via phone. The interviewees' answers to the first two questions reveal that they have not engaged in peer review practices in the secondary school and university except in the writing courses that the author taught them at the university. Their previous peer review training in class helped them to succeed in peer review via Google Docs. Generally, the participants have positive attitudes toward giving and receiving feedback in Google Docs as they were able to benefit from their peers' feedback in Google Docs. Mahmoud and Ibrahim built their own confidence when editing their peers' texts. They said, "I feel I am a writer who has editing skills" and "it is a positive feeling because I felt I am a critical editor." Likewise, Ahamed mentioned, "I

really like how it saves my time instead of meeting in class and work wherever I want.” Working outside the classroom was a factor that contributes to the positive feeling that all participants have toward online peer review. Similarly, consistent with Saeed, Ghazali, Sahuri, and Abdulrab’ study (2018), online peer feedback appears to facilitate EFL students’ writing beyond the university context.

Regarding changing the texts due to the comments received from peers in Google Docs, four participants adjusted their writing based on the received comments from their peers. For example, after Ibrahim received comment from his peer, he tackled his punctuation error as he stated, “yes, I changed comma errors.” However, the author was not able to access to long-term impact of using online peer review via Google Docs on participants’ writing development because they responded to the comments only at the time of the study.

### **Conclusion and limitations**

This study focuses on the EFL post-secondary context and employs Google Docs as an educational tool to examine which kinds of corrective feedback Saudi EFL students provide when they edit their peers’ texts, how the collaborative peer review helps them to change their texts, and their attitudes toward using Google Docs as an online peer review tool. The findings reveal that all five participants are able to improve and adjust their writing when they receive online comments from their peers that include local and global writing issues and different corrective feedback types, clarification request, explicit correction, and metalinguistic feedback. Additionally, they find that using Google Docs in peer review can aid them to work in a social environment beyond the classroom and avoid embarrassment. Overall, they have positive attitudes toward Google Docs in peer review. However, there are factors that can influence EFL students’ responses to teachers and peers’ feedback, such as hierarchical power and students’ beliefs and experiences of teachers and peers’ feedback. Considering limitations, the study cannot measure how the participants can improve their writing for long-term when receiving comments from their peers. Lastly, the results of the study cannot be generalized to other Saudi EFL university contexts due to the limited number of participants.

### **Recommendations and future research**

The participants have not practiced peer review at the secondary and university levels and have not engaged in writing advanced genres. Thus, the author recommends EFL instructors to integrate online peer review in the university writing courses and implement it as a tool for revision that values both form and content. Another recommendation, EFL instructors should move students from the five-essay genre to advanced genres, such as research paper, to enhance EFL students’ rhetorical knowledge. For future research, it is beneficial to improve this study and recruit a larger number of participants to address its limitations.

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## Appendix

### Interview Form

1. Did you do peer review activities in an English course in a secondary school? if so, explain how you did peer review.
2. Did you practice face-to-face or online peer review (Google Docs) in any writing course at a university level? if so, explain how you did peer review.
3. Did online peer review (Google Docs) help you to improve your English writing skills, especially editing and revision? In what ways?
4. What was your attitude toward giving writing comments to peer writers on Google Docs?
5. What was your attitude toward receiving writing comments from peer writers on Google Docs?
6. Did you change your texts due to comments and opinions received from peers on Google Docs? If so, how?
7. In your opinion, what are some pros and cons of the use of digital tools such as google doc with your peers?
8. Would you like to do a similar activity (peer review by using Google docs) with your teacher?